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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 000097

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [CO](#) [ELN](#)
SUBJECT: RELEASED ELN HOSTAGE DISCUSSES KIDNAPPING

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, reasons
1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (C) On December 24, poloff met with Israeli citizen Ido Guy, who had been released by the National Liberation Army (ELN) two days earlier after over three months in captivity. Guy was accompanied by Israeli security liaison Guy Ner, who had been posted at the headquarters of the Colombian military's First Division in Santa Marta during much of the hostages' captivity. Guy and Ner made several notable observations about the ELN structure and kidnapping methods:

Sequence of Events

2. (C) While camping near the city of Santa Marta, in the "Ciudad Perdida", one of Colombia's most significant archeological sites, Guy and seven other tourists were approached by a dozen armed individuals who, without identifying themselves, claimed the area was dangerous and said they would guide the tourists to safety. After walking and camping for two days, a guerrilla commander arrived to tell the tourists that the ELN was retaining them as political hostages. Prior to this, the guerrilla had refused to identify themselves. The hostages were moved frequently, usually spending no more than a few days at any one location. However, they remained at one camp for nearly a month. Two days before the hostages' release, several allegedly high-ranking ELN commanders, who concealed their faces, arrived to ask the hostages how they planned to publicly characterize their time in ELN captivity. Although the commanders did not directly pressure the hostages to describe their experience with a pro-ELN slant, they were clearly concerned about how hostages' stories would affect the ELN's international image. On December 22, their captors released them to a delegation from the Roman Catholic Church National Conciliation Commission (CCN) and the National Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (Defensoria).

A Spartan Lifestyle

3. (C) Guy, a former member of the Israeli army, estimated most of his captors to be in their late teens or early twenties. Commanders appear slightly older, possibly in their thirties. Morale among the combatants seemed good. Their educational levels and familiarity with politics and current events varied considerably. Most appeared committed to the ELN political ideology and claimed to be combating social inequality. Nearly all expressed disdain for the United States and President Uribe. In comparing themselves to the FARC, the combatants said the ELN was a more politically focused organization. Although they were well armed with Galil rifles, AK47s, and M-16s, they often played with their weapons and did not follow safety precautions. Only the commanders and a few combatants had camouflage uniforms; the others wore civilian clothes. Food was scarce. The combatants found fruits and vegetables growing in the area or commandeered livestock and other food from the local population.

Area of Operations

4. (C) Guy and Ner believe the kidnapping was approved at the highest levels of the ELN. Orders for the combatants came via radio or letters delivered by local residents, who were often indigenous persons. The ELN appeared firmly in control of territory near "Ciudad Perdida" and showed little concern about the possible presence of other illegal armed groups or the Colombian military. As they moved in what Guy believed was an easterly direction, however, the combatants appeared much less familiar with the territory and became more concerned about security. Residents of many villages through which the group passed appeared complicit with the ELN, although in other communities combatants tried to conceal the hostages and threatened villagers with retaliation if they did not assist them.

Hostage Treatment

15. (C) Guy said he and his fellow hostages were treated moderately well probably on the direct orders of senior ELN leaders. For example, the hostages ate before their captors did and were provided medical care -- albeit rudimentary -- by female combatants with limited medical supplies. Guy was given a pair of rubber boots to replace the inadequate shoes he was wearing when he was kidnapped. They were allowed to keep their watches and other valuables and could listen to the news on the radio. Guy claimed he was never seriously afraid he would be executed, but worried about health problems and the possibility of a firearms accident. The hostages were not allowed to contact their families and were not to ahead of time when they would be released. About a dozen armed combatants usually guarded them, although an additional contingent joined them for several days shortly after the kidnapping. Early in their ordeal the hostages unsuccessfully attempted to escape, after which their captors threatened to treat them more harshly but never followed up on their threats. All told, Guy estimated the hostages walked approximately 300 miles during their captivity.

Disappointing COLMIL Rescue Efforts

16. (C) Ner was frustrated by the First Division's efforts to locate the hostages. In his view, the division used the kidnapping as a justification for launching operations in the region that were only tangentially related to the hostages. He also believes that now-retired General Leonel Gomez, then-Commander of the First Division, was less than honest in describing his efforts to find the hostages. For example, Ner recounted that Gomez had claimed the hostages were taken southwest, and that First Division troops had found some of the hostages' belongings along that route. However, Ner believes the hostages were taken east and that Gomez falsely claimed to have found some of the hostages' belongings in order to appease Ner and other interested parties. According to Guy only once during their entire captivity, when they heard a helicopter in the distance, did the hostages see evidence of Colombian military operations. The Colombian military did not debrief the hostages for intelligence purposes after their release. Representatives of the Prosecutor General's Office ("Fiscalia") were the only government agents to speak with the hostages and, in Ner's opinion, the interviews they conducted were cursory.

WOOD

=====CABLE ENDS=====